

ccp.

centre for
contemporary
photography

2 NOVEMBER → 15 DECEMBER 2007

CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

404 GEORGE STREET FITZROY VIC 3065

T +613 9417 1549

E INFO@CCP.ORG.AU

WWW.CCP.ORG.AU

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical (including photocopying, recording or any information retrieval system), without permission from the publisher.

© Centre for Contemporary Photography 2007, the artist and authors.

ISBN 978 0 9751371 8 5

Kit Wise is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University. He is represented by Criterion Gallery, Hobart.



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.



CCP is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of The Australian, State and Territory Governments. CCP is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria and the Community Support Fund, and by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. CCP is a member of CAOS, Contemporary Arts Organisations of Australia.

OUTLINE

Rhapsodia is a site-specific installation comprising illuminated digital imagery and animation. The work addresses the representation in popular culture of the desired, transcultural and increasingly virtual ideal city, often defined in an ambiguous relationship to nature. This motif is used to explore the landscapes associated with civilisation and paradise.

This work was initiated during an Australia Council Tokyo studio residency in 2006, and supported with an Australia Council New Work grant in 2007. Tokyo was taken as a case study for global trends in the increasingly plastic experience of geographical, historical, social and cultural space.

In this exhibition, the ideal city is identified as the site or matrix of desire for the exotic Other. The work draws upon mashup digital practices to present a composite, fantastical hyperreal scene. Borrowing from sources including Western Medieval narrative painting, traditional Japanese ukiyo-e landscapes and science fiction cinema, the installation presents a hallucinogenic yet lyrical utopia.

BIOGRAPHY

A graduate of Oxford University and the Royal College of Art, London, Kit Wise undertook research scholarships in Paris, New York and Rome, before settling in Melbourne in 2002. Since that time, he has curated a number of national and international touring exhibitions and has published over 30 catalogue essays, book chapters and exhibition reviews, for journals including *Artlink*, *unMagazine* and *Frieze*. He is currently Deputy Head of Fine Arts, the Bachelor of Fine Art Honours Course Coordinator and Coordinator of the Sculpture and Spatial Practice Program in the Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University.

Working with found-object based sculpture, installation, digital animation and web-based imagery, Kit Wise has exhibited in France, Italy, Australia and the UK, addressing the increasingly fluid condition of the art work, the context of art and the artist in contemporary culture.

The artist would like to thank Sarah Hyslop, Naomi Cass, Karra Rees, Rhiannon Evans, Lisa Byrne, Cameron Gough, Acrylic Industries, Rhino Signmakers, Ben Wise, Domenico de Clario, Anne Marsh, Kathie Barwick, the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council and the Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University.

right: *Rhapsodia* 2007
digital print on acrylic, lightbox, mirrored acrylic
390 x 310 cm



KIT WISE
RHAPSODIA

ON LANDSCAPE AND UTOPIA

The utopian landscape is a self-consciously fictive space—just as the word itself is both a negation (*un-* = not, *topos* = place) and an artificially manufactured collision of Latin (*un-*) and ancient Greek (*topos*). And this linguistic playfulness is worth pursuing, for utopia is associated with the perfect space, the perfect social system, from the word's inception in 1516, when Thomas More's *Utopia* depicted an island (Utopia) which mirrors sixteenth-century England, but filters out poverty, corruption, conflict and ignorance. In its perfection, 'Utopia' plays on its homonym *eutopia*—not the Latin prefix *un-* but the Greek *eus* = good. Although the two are often seen as interesting alternatives, even coexisting (the good place exists in no place), More chose, and we continue to use, the hybrid form, the impossible, non-existent elision. *Eutopia*, however, suggests homogeneity—as it should, for one of the paradoxes of [e]utopia is that it cannot be susceptible to change—like infinity, anything other is something less—less than forever, less than perfection.

One of the many dilemmas of the utopian is the inability to imagine a dynamic utopia—one which allows for individuality, for internal difference, even dissent, let alone interaction with the outside: for utopia is almost always a bounded space—an island, a planet, a society cut off by an impenetrable extent of space or time. The earliest European form of utopianism is marked by nostalgia for a time beyond or before corruption: Homer's Phaeacians (*Odyssey* c.750 BCE) live a simple, but genteel life, in harmony with one another and the gods, on an island of indeterminate location, rarely visited by outsiders; Hesiod's Golden Race (*Works and Days* c.700 BCE) belong to the remote past, and are identified entirely by lack—in particular they know neither labour nor disease. It is this lack which becomes the signature of such perfect communities: by the first century BCE, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose Golden Age narrative was to have enormous influence in the Western tradition, excludes law, criminality, land-division, tree-felling, sailing, urbanisation, weapons, warfare and agriculture. Theirs is a pristine landscape, which provides sustenance to the Golden Race, but is

not significantly altered by their presence: yet from antiquity it was recognised that such a landscape could be maintained as an inhabitable space only with divine interference (the spontaneous production of food), as there is no viable source of nourishment without hunting or agriculture. As the world falls into decline, and the gods disengage from humans, civilisation emerges, along with cities, travel and the sophistication associated with both; humans become self-sufficient, but this is the Iron Age, and unbearable burdens accompany it: greed, fear, immorality and conflict. Change, anathema to the utopian, inevitably leads to the development of its dystopic inverse.

For us too the city is much more likely (although perhaps erroneously) associated with random acts of violence and abuse; overcrowding, pollution and the disruption brought by perpetually reconstructing the landscape mean that it is the *urbs* which features most easily in our dystopian narratives. 'Natural' settings, on the other hand, suggest not only the paradisaic, but also the *locus amoenus*, literally 'pleasant place'. In the European tradition the *locus amoenus* is a scene of peace, shade, water and harmony, which can be pastoral, but without the invasion of agriculture or any significant human intervention—a landscape which indicates the pre-civilised, but also the prelapsarian. In Greco-Roman mythology, it is inhabited by free spirited nymphs and other demi-gods, yet, in another paradox, the pacific scene is often disturbed, as it provides the unexpected backdrop to narratives of graphic and brutal violence (abduction, rape, murder) which involve a loss of individual identity, and in particular the merging of subjectivity with the landscape (the raped water nymph Arethusa dissolves into her own spring; Narcissus loses himself in the pool's reflection and becomes a flower). For the idyllic landscape was always a place of danger and loss, and the original Pastoral genre comprised poetic laments for lost loves. As is frequently true of the utopian, the landscape of *Rhapsodia* is saturated with paradox: its impossible juxtaposition of dark and light, its hyperreal use of artificial light which shines brighter in the sunlight, and the existence of patches of darkness within the neon glow of the city

suggest disturbance within the apparently discrete sections of the landscape. Beneath the serenity of the pool and the shade of the trees is the perpetual question: what lurks out of sight?

Between urban and pastoral is the fictive nature that is parkland—an attempt to merge and contain the untamed within a built-up environment, which maintains the tension between artificial and wilderness even more effectively if (as in the foreground here) it aims to create a 'tamed' version of nature, a constructed countryside. Gardens similarly provide the convenience of circumscribed nature within a suburban setting, as they negotiate a nexus of contradictions, enclosing the apparently wild, the living, the rural, within an urban setting. The garden and the park deliver the illusion of spontaneous growth within a fabricated frame, much as the landscape painting offers a parallel fabrication. Indeed, Pastoral is a paradoxical genre in itself: as invented by the third century BCE Greek poet Theocritus, the *Idylls* were highly polished and sophisticated works, yet written in the subject voice of shepherds and peasants—another rusticated artifice. A multiplicity of landscapes coexist within the frame of the image here—wilderness, parkland, water, low-rise housing, high-rise cityscape—incorporating the artificial and natural in this way is the dream of designer settlements from antiquity to new towns. Like the ancient rhapsode, the poet who sings Greek myth, it sutures diverse worlds, an amalgam of European and Asian cultures, of ancient and modern, culminating in the non-specific cityscape of global homogenisation. Juxtaposing the apparently irreconcilable is in itself a utopian move, and one embedded in its original form: so, More's text is written in Latin, the language of Classical tradition and hierarchy, yet set in the New World, an open space, seen as both primitive and also full of possibility.

Dr. Rhiannon Evans is a Lecturer in Classics, at the University of Melbourne. Her book *Utopia Antiqua: Readings of the Golden Age and Decline at Rome* (2008) is forthcoming from Routledge.

HUMAN PINBALLS

One universal condition of humanity is the compulsion to make and give order to the world that surrounds us. No matter what discipline one cites, examples can be provided that give weight to this assertion. Indeed the manner in which we attempt such a task is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of humanity. Kit Wise's new work *Rhapsodia* is part portal, part window, part kaleidoscope, offering the viewer the opportunity to simultaneously interpret and project their own desires upon his hyperreal landscape in order to understand what is going on within this specific frame of reference.

Wise is in good company when it comes to such an endeavour. Offering differing perspectives on the manner unto which we might understand the world around us, one might start with the likes of the Old Testament, the Koran, the Dreamtime, the teachings of Buddha and the Mahabrata, among others. Then one could equally quote Aristotle, Plato, Immanuel Kant, Slavoj Žižek, and most philosophers who took the time to theorise about the structure of the world. This is not to suggest that Wise is commencing an all out new visual and theoretical structuring of humanity but rather to anchor the profound drive over many generations and disciplines of the curiosity of humanity when it comes to making sense of the world in which they inhabit.

Perhaps most closely aligned with Wise in his current body of work are the examples found during the Romantic period in art history. Painters and engravers alike were out to visually order the world through direct references to nature and the senses. Grand masters such as J.W Turner, John Martin and Claude Lorrain were all grappling with the representation of the world. Turner arrives finally at his wonderfully chaotic, blurred atmospheric paintings, Lorrain went for idealised luscious representational images of fertile lands also known as the picturesque and notably John Martin (1789-1854) who like Wise was fascinated with reconciling the complexities of humanity through the suturing of fictional and non fictional elements in his paintings. As Christopher Johnstone reports in his 1974 book *John Martin*, in the prospectus for *The Illustration of the Bible* (1835) Martin himself is quoted as describing his aim as an artist:

*To avail himself 'of all objects afforded by inanimate nature, as well as by the passions and ingenuity of man, by bringing before the eye the vast and magnificent edifices of the ancient world, its forests, wilds, interminable plains, its caverns and rocks and mountains, by freely employing the aid of its powerful and primitive elements of fire and water, which, when agitated by their Almighty Disposer (using the language of the poet) "between the green sea and the azure vault sets roaring war."*¹

In this particular idyllic image Wise, effectively sutures the segments into a magnificently unified vision of illuminated wonder, effortlessly dissolving linear time and specific location. It could be fantasy just as much as it could be reality. In doing this Wise counterpoints numerous binary opposites seamlessly: day and night, foreground and background, light and dark, urban and rural, high and low, above ground, below ground, cool and warm and so forth. In this way we as viewers are presented with a perfect visual *rhapsode*². In working with a known structure or genre—landscape and localising it through points of reference that add to a strong multifocal vernacular sensibility, Wise opens our mind's eye to imagine his world through our own experiences. For the viewer this stimulates appreciation by way of personal associations, what we see and understand is actually about what networks and alliances we bring to the visual encounter with the work. Therefore Wise's landscape could be said to be both everything and nothing at one in the same time for the viewer, which in no way diminishes Wise's practice rather it enriches it with such Romantic promise.

In using the *rhapsode* as a metaphor for bringing together the various parts of his landscape, Wise treads directly into the universal conundrum of humanity. We know that his sutured world cannot ever be fully identified, it cannot exist in real terms. No matter how much we want to accept his offer of utopia, we are ultimately left with the experience of wanting, all too familiar throughout the Romantic period of art. Even down to the illusionary play with the plexiglass mirrors, Wise seems to optimistically speaking, be encouraging his audience to continue

the visual road trip despite its penultimate circularity. We are not offered a definitive end in this work by the artist only motivation to continue to scour our existence for meaning and clarity wherever that may be, as a kind of human pinball, bouncing here, there and everywhere.

Lisa Byrne is an independent curator and writer.



1. See: <http://www.wojm.org.uk/>
2. The term *rhapsode* refers to the Ancient Greek figure of the 'song-stitcher', an itinerant performer of epic poetry. Fables, myths, jokes and political satire would also be synthesised into a seamless, improvised oral rendition, intended to delight the audience. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhapsode>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhapsode>

Rhapsodia (installation study) 2007
digital print on acrylic, lightbox, mirrored acrylic
390 x 310 cm